

Small Counties Project

REGIONAL ASSISTANCE

In 1995, the Administrative Office of the Courts established a regional assistance program to provide information to courts, legislators, and the public on a regional basis. In 1999 the focus of this program shifted to the 38 smallest counties in California.¹ This shift occurred in response to changes resulting from the Lockyer-Isenberg Trial Court Funding Act of 1997 (Assem. Bill 233) and the court unification measure (Prop. 220). Although these measures presented significant opportunities for improvement in trial court systems statewide, they also produced new challenges for smaller courts—challenges that are very different from those facing urban courts.

The smallest counties have been divided into two regions, as follows:

North Region

Butte, Colusa, Del Norte, Glenn, Humboldt, Lake, Lassen, Mendocino, Modoc, Nevada, Placer, Plumas, Shasta, Sierra, Siskiyou, Sutter, Tehama, Trinity, Yuba.

Central Region

Alpine, Amador, Calaveras, El Dorado, Imperial, Inyo, Kings, Madera, Marin, Mariposa, Merced, Mono, Napa, San Benito, San Luis Obispo, Santa Cruz, Tulare, Tuolumne, Yolo.

PROGRAM OBJECTIVES

- Evaluate, in partnership with the courts, whether direct service, technical assistance, or regional assistance is the best approach to reducing costs and increasing efficiency for each area of management and business services. Develop an implementation plan to deliver these services—e.g., working groups, pilot courts, or task forces.
- Provide a forum in which the smaller courts can meet quarterly to share problems and concerns and create plans for improving communication, coordination, cooperation, and administration.
- Develop skills-based training programs to address specific court management needs, such as contract management and negotiations, facility management, and personnel management.
- Provide technical assistance to courts to establish and evaluate programs and procedures.
- Coordinate and manage pilot projects, conduct studies, and make recommendations to meet the goals in the small courts in a way that is consistent with the Judicial Council's policies and goals.
- Provide technical assistance for administrative policies and procedures; develop guidelines and model contracts.
- Mediate contractual agreements between the courts and the counties as needed.
- Establish an online resource directory to provide information to courts electronically, such as listings of trainings, consultants, and contractors that are available to local courts.

¹Twenty of the 38 smallest counties were relieved of their county expenditure maintenance-of-effort (MOE) requirement in fiscal year 1998–1999, and an additional 18 counties have been relieved of their county expenditure MOE requirement in fiscal year 1999–2000.

SMALL COUNTIES MEETINGS

In an attempt to respond to the unique demands of each jurisdiction and to address transition issues under AB 233 and Proposition 220, AOC staff set up the first in a continuing series of meetings with presiding judges and court executives from small counties. Administrative Director William C. Vickrey and other AOC staff met with the North Region group on June 11, 1999, in Sacramento and with the Central Region group on June 21, 1999, in Fresno. The agendas included overviews of current activities in the areas of court interpreters, assigned judges, and the Task Force on Trial Court Employees.

These meetings are also intended to be forums in which officials of small courts discuss and resolve common issues; thereby, fulfilling one of the program goals. The court executives and judges who attend these meetings have presented issues and requests for assistance in areas such as human resource management, risk management and indemnification, labor relations, facilities, technology, and judicial benefits. The AOC will assist the courts by serving as a resource for standards and guidelines.

Additional meetings were held in September 1999 and January 2000 and are planned to continue every four months.

PROGRAM ACTIVITIES

In response to issues that were enunciated by the small counties, AOC staff has provided outreach and technical assistance, including the following:

1. Establishment of a court fellow program that enables former Court executives to directly assist smaller courts in, for example, developing budgets, rectifying historical

underfunding, and managing unanticipated costs. A court fellow makes regular site visits and provides in-depth assistance upon request.

2. Early in January 2000, a working group undertook a review of memoranda of understanding (MOUs) and county A87s—an allocation process whereby courts are charged for services provided by their counties—and to recommend viable agreements with counties. Negotiation assistance will be available upon request.
3. Provision of coverage for those judges and commissioners whose actions are brought before the Commission on Judicial Performance.
4. Establishment of computer system user groups and development of computer case management and fiscal systems.
5. Dissemination of court interpreter lists by region and lists of labor relations consultants.

Small County Mini-Grants

State funds in the amount of \$125,000 were made available to help enhance efforts in the transition to unification and state funding. The small counties were encouraged to apply for funding, particularly on a regional or multiple-county basis. Five projects aiding 15 small counties received these awards.

The 27-member Judicial Council is the policymaking body of the California courts, the largest and busiest court system in the nation. Under the leadership of the Chief Justice and in accordance with the California Constitution, the council is responsible for ensuring the consistent, independent, impartial, and accessible administration of justice. The Administrative Office of the Courts serves as the staff agency to the council.